



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414

Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation

Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F

Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

## Religions and Environmental Ethics

A Comparative Study of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed  
Hossein Nasr

Md. Abu Sayem

To cite this article:

Sayem, Md. Abu. "Religions and Environmental Ethics: A Comparative Study of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 34-50.



Published online: 30 December 2019



Submit your article to this journal



View related and/or other articles in this issue

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at

<https://ajis.com.au/index.php/ajis/tncs>

## **RELIGIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOHN B. COBB, JR. AND SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR**

Md. Abu Sayem\*

**Abstract:** Religious moral teaching has a deep relationship with environmental ethics. Cobb and Nasr attempt to bring religious moral foundations in discourses of environmental issues. Cobb tries to address the ecological crisis in connection with the Christian faith while Nasr attempts to deal with the issue from an Islamic understanding of nature. Now, a general question follows: Are their eco-religious thoughts complementary to the present formation of environmental ethics? This paper makes a comparative analysis of their eco-religious views of the environment and their suggestions for ecological sustainability. In so doing, the paper shows why their eco-religious understandings are important in environmental ethics and how their suggestions can motivate humans to protect of the natural environment.

**Keywords:** *Anthropocentrism, biocentrism, eco-centrism, eco-theology, environmental ethics, Islam, nature, religious morality, theocentrism*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Religions work as a source of moral values and virtues from which ethical codes and laws are regarded to emerge. Though ethics and laws are thought of now as independent of religions, they are related with religious moral teachings in many ways. In academic discourses, environmental ethics has emerged as a new discipline to address the present ecological crisis from an ethical point of view. Some environmental historians and ethicists, for example Lynn White (1907-1987) and Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), blame religions for allowing human supremacy over non-human creatures.<sup>1</sup> Religious scholars or theologians have tried to respond

---

\* Md. Abu Sayem is an Associate Professor in the Department of World Religions and Culture at the University of Dhaka (Bangladesh); and also a (continuing) PhD student in the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong SAR).

The present contribution is based on his ongoing PhD dissertation project in religious studies titled "Religious Perspectives on Environmental Issues: A Comparative Study on John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr" at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The substance was read at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Oxford Symposium on Religious Studies held in Oxford on 4-6 December 2017. Author acknowledges the valued suggestions of his PhD supervisor Professor Lai Pan-Chiu and PhD co-supervisor Professor James D. Frankel of Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for the formation and improvement of the current paper. He also expresses thanks to the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong SAR for the travel grant to attend the symposium.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Brennan and Y. S. Lo, *Understanding Environmental Philosophy* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 165.

to their allegations, then stated religious and spiritual approaches to the environment are potential factors for rectifying present scientific worldviews of nature. Arguably true, science and (secular) environmental ethics cannot solve the problem without the cooperation of faith communities. Therefore, scientists and environmental ethicists need deep collaboration with the religions of the world to control the present environmental crisis.<sup>2</sup>

The current ecological crisis is a result of uncontrolled human activities in the natural world. Using science and technology, greedy humans exploit the natural environment for economic affluence. Science and technology give ample power to show human mastery in nature, but unfortunately, they could not provide a strong ethical or moral consciousness on how to use these powers for the benefit of all creatures, including human beings. On the other hand, some (secular) environmental ethicists, for instance Peter Singer (b. 1946) and Tom Regan (1938-2017), frequently talk about ethical attitudes to non-human animals, but they could not articulate spiritual feelings for non-human creatures, which seem essential to generate a right and just approach to non-human animals and other constituents of the natural world.

Environmental ethics is a relatively new academic discipline. It emerged in the early 1970s,<sup>3</sup> primarily attached to environmental philosophy and applied ethics.<sup>4</sup> As a part of modern knowledge, environmental ethics deals with the secular way of understanding rather than religious guidance. It may be called (secular) environmental ethics. Environmental ethicists are seen, in most cases, as critics of the hierarchical value approaches of religions,<sup>5</sup> especially of organised monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Some scholars realise the significance of religious moral teachings in motivating human attitudes in favour of environmental sustainability,<sup>6</sup> so they want to see an alliance between religiously oriented

<sup>2</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>3</sup> M. A. Dombayci, "Teaching of Environmental Ethics: Caring Thinking," *Journal of Environmental Protection and Ecology* 15, no. 3A (2014): 1404-1421; Scott Brennan and Jay Wilhoggott, eds., *Environment: The Science Behind the Stories* (San Francisco: Pearson/Benjamin Cummings, 2005), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Belshaw, *Environmental Philosophy: Reason, Nature and Human Concern* (Chesham Bucks: Acumen, 2001); Brennan and Lo, *Understanding Environmental Philosophy*; Kees Vromans, ed., *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction and Learning Guide* (Sheffield: General Publishing Ltd., 2012); John Benson, *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction with Readings* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000); Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, U.K.; Malden, M.A.: Polity Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Townsend White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967); Daniel A. Dombrowski, *Hartshorne and the Metaphysics of Animal Rights* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993); Brennan and Lo, *Understanding Environmental Philosophy*, 165; Alastair M. Taylor and Duncan M. Taylor, "Our Common Future: World Development and the Environment," in *Planet Earth: Problems and Prospects*, eds. James A. Leith, Raymond A. Price and John H. Spencer (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Arnold Toynbee, "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 3, no. 1-4 (1972).

<sup>6</sup> Willis Jenkins and Christopher K. Chapple, "Religion and Environment," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 36 (2011); Aimie L. B. Hope and Christopher R. Jones, "The Impact of Religious Faith on Attitudes to Environmental Issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) Technologies: A Mixed Methods Study," *Technology in Society* 38 (2014): 57; Lai Pan-Chiu, "Interreligious Dialogue and Environmental Ethics," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 21, no. 1 (2011): 5, 17; Lai Pan-Chiu, "God of Life and Ecological Theology: A Chinese Christian Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (2013): 67; Stephen C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue—An Interfaith Dialogue* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 1-2.

environmental ethics and the present form of environmental ethics.<sup>7</sup> In the past, religious scholars worked on religious foundations of moral teachings, but specific responses from modern religious scholars, addressing (secular) environmental ethics, especially developed by Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) and Holmes Rolston (b. 1932) for example, came somewhat later. Scholars like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), Paul Tillich (1886-1965), Thomas Berry (1914-2009), John B. Cobb, Jr. (b. 1925), Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926) and H. Paul Santmire (b. 1935) from the Christian faith tradition, and Fazlun Khalid (b. 1932), Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), Mawil Izzi Dien (b. 1948) and İbrahim Özdemir (b. 1960) from the Islamic religious tradition, are famous for their eco-religious works. I have narrowed the discussion by selecting Cobb<sup>8</sup> and Nasr.<sup>9</sup> Both scholars have extensively worked on eco-religious ethics and presented their proposals for environmental sustainability. The works of Cobb<sup>10</sup> and Nasr<sup>11</sup> are considered influential contributions to this field from a religious point of view. They locate eco-religious teachings with the present discourse of environmental issues and reinterpret religious moral teachings on the environment for the same purpose, but in different ways. There are similarities and differences in their understanding, approaches and methods of application. The present study makes a comparative analysis of their eco-religious views, suggestions, theories and approaches for environmental sustainability. The study shows how their understandings about the human perception of nature can articulate religious moral teachings with the present form of environmental ethics and why they are needed for rereading

<sup>7</sup> Willis J. Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ron Elsdon, *Bent World: Science, the Bible, and the Environment* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981); Elizabeth Breuilly and Martin Palmer, eds., *Christianity and Ecology* (New York: Cassel, 1992); Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, "Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," *Daedalus* 130, no.4 (2001); J. Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); James B. Martin-Schramm and Robert L. Stivers, *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003); Kathryn D. Blanchard and Kevin J. O'Brien, *An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism: Ecology, Virtue, and Ethics* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014); Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of the Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Centre for the Study of World Religions, 2000); Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin, *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2003); M. Izzi Dien, *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2000); R. P. Misra, ed., *Environmental Ethics: A Dialogue of Culture* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> For his life and works, see John B. Cobb, Jr., *Theological Reminiscences* (Claremont, California: Process Century Press, 2014). For his theological biography, see David Ray Griffin and Joseph C. Hough, *Theology and the University: Essays in Honor of John B. Cobb* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> For a short biography of Nasr, see Enes Karic, "Nasr: Tinker of the Sacred," in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001), 782-783. For a detailed biographical description, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "An Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001), 3-85.

<sup>10</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (Texas: Environmental Ethics Book, 1972); John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability, Ecology and Justice* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992); John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1994); John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man, and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1976 [1968]); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*.

and analysis in the context of environmental sustainability. It also investigates their thoughts considering their respective religious traditions and different environmental ethical theories and approaches. In so doing, I explore a new research in the present body of knowledge on the collaboration of religions with environmental ethics.

## HOW COBB AND NASR RELATE RELIGIONS WITH ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Cobb was not prepared to divert his concentration to environmental issues until 1969.<sup>12</sup> After learning about the increasing ecological crisis from the seminal works of Paul Ehrlich<sup>13</sup> and Lynn White,<sup>14</sup> Cobb became interested in eco-theology. His focus was to show how the Christian faith can contribute to reform human attitudes towards the natural environment. Being a critic of the past role of Christian Church, he attempts to reconstruct Christian teachings about nature and the environment. He confesses the medieval Christian Church may be indirectly responsible for environmental degradation to some extent because of its role in supporting the dominant culture of a human-centric approach to the natural world,<sup>15</sup> but modern science and technology are direct causes of the present ecological crisis.<sup>16</sup>

In his view, the natural environment was damaged in many ways over the centuries by natural and artificial causes. Human civilisation is a cause of this damage. The European Renaissance, humanism and secular worldview of nature further degraded the situation. Modern scientific knowledge convinces humans to exploit nature for their comfort on earth. With a mechanistic view of nature and the help of modern technological power, humans have been destroying the environment since the Industrial Revolution as never before.

As said before, Cobb was disappointed with the role of the Christian Church in the preservation of the natural environment. He also blames the Church and Christian theologians for misinterpreting some biblical verses to support exploiting the natural world. In his view, the Bible not only tells about human supremacy over non-human animals and plants, but also makes them caretakers of God's creation. The deficiency he discovers in the Church and theologians is they always give priority to human supremacy and ignore the role of caretaker of the natural world. When modern scientists and modern philosophers were talking about conquering the natural world with the power of modern technology, the Christian Church and theologians tried to prove this event as biblical prophecy, while they should have convinced them not to forget human's role as steward or trustee. In Cobb's view, theological interpretations were one-sided, because Christian scholars prioritised human interest, which was not a correct way of interpreting the Bible. Through such constructive criticism of the Church and theologians, Cobb takes the challenge to reinterpret biblical verses related to human's responsibility toward nature to reconstruct Christian moral teachings for the purpose

<sup>12</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 1; Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good*, vii.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."

<sup>15</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 33.

of ecological justice. Cobb's knowledge of process philosophy and process theology assist him with this work.

Nasr was very fond of the natural environment since childhood.<sup>17</sup> Having seen ecological degradation at different levels in the USA surrounding his living places, he was very concerned and used to think about how to address the issue. During his PhD study at Harvard University, he felt a responsibility to work on the relationship between humans and the natural world. His first academic work was about cosmology.<sup>18</sup> Upon reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*,<sup>19</sup> Nasr acquired a comprehensive idea of environmental degradation in indiscriminate human activities. Then he started to search for the root causes of the current environmental crisis and, like Cobb, he regards modern science and technology as the main reasons for the present unprecedented ecological problems. Nasr, like Cobb, argues that since the advent of European Renaissance and humanism, modern science has been measured as the accepted criteria of knowledge, while spiritual knowledge has no place for consideration in modern knowledge. This sort of knowledge is accompanied by secular ideology, which drives out sacredness from nature. For him, after long debates and struggles between science and religion in the continent of Europe, scientific revolution gained momentum and won over theology. Following this, there was virtually no authority to challenge scientism. Moreover, religious institutions, especially the Christian Church, could not dare to stand against scientific theories; rather, they started to appreciate scientists' new discoveries as a part of human supremacy over the natural world in light of biblical prophecy.

Nasr clarifies furthermore, in the beginning, the Christian Church was hostile to modern science. However, the Church could not overtake scientific revolution and then become silent to modern scientific knowledge and technological inventions; even later on, it endorsed modern science and technology. That is why, like Cobb, Nasr criticises the Christian Church for not raising a strong voice against the bad consequences of modern sciences. Despite this, Nasr sees, as an influential faith tradition, Christianity can respond to the ecological crisis and has the capability to address the issue. In this regard, he advocates for a new Christian theology, i.e. eco-theology, to deal with the present environmental problems from a Christian theological perspective. Nasr articulates religious traditions of the world in the discourse of the ecological crisis, though he prefers to refer to Eastern traditions more than Western traditions.<sup>20</sup> In Nasr's view, traditional ideas of nature are helpful for environmental justice. Perhaps for this reason, he prefers to claim to be a traditionalist instead of a modernist or reformist. He argues environmental sustainability lies usually in traditional ways of understanding. All traditions are, in his view, treasures of the world; people should use their knowledge to mitigate ecological problems. Thus, he supports retrieving traditional knowledge more than

---

<sup>17</sup> Nasr, "An Intellectual Autobiography," 28-29.

<sup>18</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine: Conceptions of Nature and Methods used for Its Study by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964).

<sup>19</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis," *The Ecologist* 30 (2000).

constructing and reconstructing these in new ways. Though Nasr has kept Islamic faith traditions and Islamic spirituality in focus, he does not ignore or underestimate other religious traditions.

The common point is both scholars agree the current ecological crisis is a direct product of modern science and technology.<sup>21</sup> If there is any deficiency in religions, it is, as they viewed, that faith institutions and faith communities failed to play their positive role according to the basis of religious moral foundations in nature. For them, religious moral teachings can work strongly to motivate human perceptions and behaviour to treat non-human animals and other organisms of the environment justly. Revitalising such moral guidelines for the sake of environmental sustainability is inevitable to them. Therefore, Cobb and Nasr attempt to connect faiths, especially their respective religions, with the current ecological degradations to grow sympathetic consciousness for the natural world. In approach, Cobb is more critical of the role of the Christian Church and theologians,<sup>22</sup> while Nasr is not as critical of the Islamic traditional understanding of the natural world. Cobb's style is reformative and reconstructive, while Nasr's style seems revival and explorative. Cobb and Nasr suggest reinterpreting the theology of nature to address the current environmental problems from faith perspectives and they have dedicated themselves to such initiatives. Thus, Cobb and Nasr have brought the current unprecedented ecological crisis to theological discourse and connected them with religious moral teachings of environmental ethics. Their seminal works and other activities have attracted many theologians and researchers for further scholarly contributions to the environmental issue relating to theology and religions.

## HOW COBB AND NASR RELATE NATURE TO A METAPHOR OF LIFE

Cobb and Nasr always relate the natural world to something living.<sup>23</sup> They argue the ecological crisis began when nature was seen as lifeless through a mechanistic metaphor.<sup>24</sup> They vehemently criticise modern science and the so-called secular scientific worldview for certifying nature as dead and the development of a mechanistic view based on it. When nature appears to modern humans as lifeless, they cannot grow a sympathetic attitude to it. It is logical why humans should have a sympathetic attitude to something dead. Then, how could they see an intrinsic value in natural objects? With such clearance from modern science, humans are automatically inspired to use the natural world, like a production machine to meet their unlimited needs as they wish. In this way, it has become very easy for modern humans to treat nature in irresponsible ways, because nature is dead and only for their needs; as a dead substance, nature is not regarded for human attention. Cobb and Nasr argue, if nature is not considered dead, perhaps humans would not show such irresponsible behaviour toward the

<sup>21</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 33; Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal, "The Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," *Islam & Science* 5, no.1 (2007): 76.

<sup>22</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 25-28; Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, 119-125.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 263; Nasr, *Man, and Nature*, 14.

natural world; in contrast, if it is viewed as something living, perhaps the human attitude to nature will be different from what we have now.

For Cobb and Nasr, the main reason for the current unprecedented ecological crisis lies in the human perception of nature. If the present perception – “nature is dead/lifeless” – is not changed substantially to the perception that “nature is alive,” humans will not be convinced to behave gently and responsibly to the natural world. So, Cobb and Nasr attempt to rectify the human perception of nature, especially the mechanistic view of nature, in their own ways. In this regard, Cobb’s ecological model is praiseworthy, through which he tries to show the natural world is not like a machine or something dead; rather, it is a great organism in which everything is interdependent and interrelated.<sup>25</sup> He argues modern biological science does not support the mechanistic view. On the other hand, through a deep metaphysical discussion, Nasr tries to show, though the natural world may seem dead externally, it is not dead; rather, it is alive.<sup>26</sup> Referring to many verses from the holy scriptures and many mystics’ spiritual views, Nasr attempts to convince humans that the mechanistic view is wrong. Thus, Cobb and Nasr take initiatives to present nature with a metaphor of life, though their approaches are somewhat different. Cobb ties this metaphor to biological and ecological science, while Nasr connects it to a spiritual and metaphysical understanding.

## **COBB’S AND NASR’S VALUE APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**

Before determining Cobb’s and Nasr’s value approaches to environmental ethics, I will look at some fundamental points about ethics and environmental ethics.

### ***Definition of Ethics and its Classification***

Ethics implies the moral obligations of humans towards others. It is generally categorised under three basic divisions: virtue ethics; deontological or duty-based ethics; and consequentialist ethics.<sup>27</sup> Virtue ethics is the oldest school of these three categories. It was originally developed by Aristotle (384-322 BCE).<sup>28</sup> It deals with virtuous/righteous behaviour or attitudes toward others. John Locke (1632-1704) was the first to talk about deontology, which was further developed and reinterpreted by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Based on “Golden Rule” (treat others as you would like to be treated by them), it refers to rights or duties without consideration of any reward or fear. Consequentialist ethics was established by David Hume (1711-1776), then further developed and elaborated by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). It is also known as utilitarianism. It usually refers to the effects or nature of any action. It advocates the greatest good for the greatest number of people. These three categories are considered the foundation for general understanding of ethical

<sup>25</sup> Birch and Cobb, *The Liberation of Life*, 17, 42, 123, 240.

<sup>26</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 24, 271.

<sup>27</sup> Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, 33-38.

<sup>28</sup> Brennan and Wilhgott, *Environment*, 30.



values. Each category is not free from limitations. All three approaches should converge in a person wishing to be ethical. So, ethical life refers commonly to integrating ethical virtues (virtue ethics), adhering to ethical principles (deontological ethics) and performing better (consequentialist ethics).

### ***Environmental Ethics and its Approaches***

Environmental ethics is the application of ethical standards to the relationship between human and non-human entities in the environment.<sup>29</sup> It is primarily divided into two approaches: anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric.<sup>30</sup> The anthropocentric approach is a human-centred view according to which only humans have value and other entities have no intrinsic value. It articulates self-egoism (only myself), group egoism (family and friends), classicism (all people of my class), nationalism, racism, sexism and all living human beings (universalism).<sup>31</sup> It sees the natural world from an instrumental value point; for instance, nature is life-supporting or due to its aesthetic value natural beauty also pleases the human mind. Within the non-anthropocentric approach pathocentrism deals with the moral status of sentient entities that feel pleasure and pain; biocentrism refers to the value of all living beings; eco-centrism talks about the moral status of the eco-system and endangered species; and holism refers to the moral status of the whole eco-system, including the ethical value of abiotic elements like rocks, soil, air, sunlight, water, etc.<sup>32</sup> Eco-feminism and environmental pragmatism are also categorised as non-anthropocentric. Eco-feminism criticises the patriarchal social system, arguing it exploits nature like women. According to this approach, only a patriarchy-free society can provide environmental justice. Environmental pragmatism talks about the intrinsic value of all living entities, but it emphasises working for environmental sustainability rather than theoretical discussion.

### ***Environmental Ethics According to Cobb and Nasr***

Cobb and Nasr have not confined their discussions to any specific value approach to environmental ethics to an extreme degree. While they talk about the environment, they consider the whole, not specific part; so, their eco-theological understandings seemingly cover all these approaches. They have not related themselves with any specific value approach to environmental ethics, because they state present environmental ethics are insufficient to address the issue. For them, though current environmental ethics talk about human moral obligations to the environment, it fails to grow a strong feeling for the natural world and cannot create inner consciousness in the human mind about the essentiality of a healthy environment. Furthermore, they argue, without cooperation from religions, such spiritual feelings and inner consciousness for the environment are impossible to grow in the human mind, but secular environmental ethics does not consider religious moral teachings as an influential agent to

---

<sup>29</sup> Dombayci, "Teaching of Environmental Ethics."

<sup>30</sup> Vromans, *Environmental Ethics*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

motivate current human perception of nature and the environment. Despite such weakness in present environmental ethics, they never criticise it harshly; rather, they appreciate it to some extent. Their full concentration is to first divert human attitude toward nature, then convince humans to conduct a lifestyle compatible with ecological sustainability. In this regard, they see religions as a positive force to implement the target they wish to reach. While Cobb reinterprets Christian teachings to form a new Christianity,<sup>33</sup> Nasr revives the moral foundations of Islam regarding nature with a new interpretation.<sup>34</sup> Their aims are the same, but the mode of their thought is somewhat different, as told before. However, if I assess their eco-religious thought in light of value approaches to environmental ethics, I could say their eco-religious understandings comparatively correspond to a bio-centric value approach more than any other.

### *Cobb's Value Approaches to Environmental Ethics*

Though Cobb recognises the hierarchy of value and bio-pyramid,<sup>35</sup> which imply the superior position of humans over others, he does not deny the intrinsic value of other non-human entities of the environment; rather, with biblical interpretations (Genesis 2:15) along with other scientific evidences, he attempts to prove other non-human beings have inherent value.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, he criticises Christian scholars and theologians for misinterpreting a biblical verse (Genesis 1:28) to disprove the intrinsic value of other entities.<sup>37</sup> He suggests interpreting Genesis 1:28 with Genesis 2:15 for a clear, comprehensive understanding about the relationship between humans and non-human components of the natural world. He argues, as God's creation, everything has its own value<sup>38</sup> but all values are not equal.<sup>39</sup> He is convinced that the Bible never recognises the extreme anthropocentric value approach,<sup>40</sup> though humans are given special dignity over other creatures.

For Cobb, if there is any value centric approach in the Bible it is God-centric, not anthropocentric. In his view, Christian scholars and theologians have transformed this theocentric approach into an anthropocentric approach over the centuries.<sup>41</sup> Arguably, it is a fault of Christian institutions and theologians, but not Christianity. In this way, Cobb reinterprets Christianity from an ecological perspective. However, when Cobb talks about the intrinsic value of all biotic organisms, it relates to a bio-centric approach; when he talks about the relationship of all living forms with themselves and concurrently with non-living components of the environment, it deals with an eco-centric approach; and when he talks about the hierarchy of values and biotic pyramid, it refers to an anthropocentric approach. Thus, with a significant relationship in a bio-centric value approach, Cobb's eco-theological

<sup>33</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 55-56; Cobb, *Sustainability*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, 129-145; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 214-215.

<sup>35</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 53; Birch and Cobb, *The Liberation of Life*, 205.

<sup>36</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 117.

<sup>37</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 92-94.

<sup>38</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 117.

<sup>39</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 117; Birch and Cobb, *The Liberation of Life*, 205.

<sup>40</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 93.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

understanding is his own value approach to the environment simultaneously covering the three mainstream value approaches of environmental ethics.

Though Cobb appreciates earthism and the Gaia hypothesis to some extent as an opposing movement to economism, he is very critical of these two new theories and approaches because of their possibility to replace God.<sup>42</sup> For Cobb, as God's responsible creatures, humans should not accept anything where God's place is neglected. He does not like to see unexpected debates and unnecessary disputes between/among environmental movements – deep ecologists, social ecologists, eco-feminists, sustainable agriculturalists, green movement, etc. He advocates for combined the working force to halt the present unprecedented ecological crisis. He does not want to rely only on the traditional stewardship concept and present environmental ethics; for him, both are insufficient to care for the environment.<sup>43</sup> He has developed certain frameworks like the ecological asceticism<sup>44</sup> ecological model of life<sup>45</sup> and ecological model of development<sup>46</sup> to address the present environmental crisis. So, Cobb's eco-theological approach is inclusive of certain points, critical to some extent and pragmatic in terms of implementation.

### ***Nasr's Value Approaches to Environmental Ethics***

Like Cobb, Nasr recognises hierarchical relationships among the components of the environment.<sup>47</sup> For him, in all religious and cultural traditions, such relationships are commonly seen with subtle differences. He considers this kind of relationship as universal.<sup>48</sup> Nasr's God–Human–Earth hierarchical relationship model does not have association with an anthropocentric value approach to the environmental ethics. In a radical anthropocentric approach, humans are kept at the centre, but in Nasr's relationship model, humans have a place between God and nature. As created by the same God, humans are part of the natural world. Though humans are given prestigious status among God's creatures, they are made responsible to take care of what God has created on God's behalf. Humans are permitted to benefit from the environment, but they are not given an open licence to exploit the natural world brutally as per their wishes. Nasr vehemently criticises the anthropocentric value approach to the environment. Nasr coins it a result of the modern scientific worldview. As for the development of this value approach, he argues, due to the secular worldview, modern humans first separate God from humans, then humans from nature. Thus, God and nature have no value in the secular worldview; only humans are its concern. Furthermore, secular philosophers and scientists

<sup>42</sup> Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good*, 40; Cobb, *The Earthist Challenge to Economism*, 7, 179.

<sup>43</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 124; Birch and Cobb, *The Liberation of Life*, 150.

<sup>44</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*, 58, 63.

<sup>45</sup> Birch and Cobb, *The Liberation of Life*, 122-123.

<sup>46</sup> Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good*, viii; Herman E. Daly, John B. Cobb and Clifford W. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 229.

<sup>47</sup> Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, 136, 140; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 161.

<sup>48</sup> Ian Mevorach, "In Search of a Christian Muslim Common Path from Desacralization to Resacralization of Nature: Sallie McFague and Seyyed Hossein Nasr on the Ecological Crisis" (unpublished PhD diss., Boston University, 2015), 146.

attempt to prove that nature is not something alive, it is dead; it works like a machine and its purpose is only to serve humans. For Nasr, such views of nature developed by so-called modern scientific worldviews have a completely anthropocentric value approach to environmental ethics. He criticises this radical anthropocentric approach and blames modern science for its development.

Nasr talks about the anthropocosmic idea instead of the anthropocentric view.<sup>49</sup> He argues anthropocosmism deals with the deep relationship between heaven and earth where humans are found between them with a proper relationship. In traditional societies, humans have this view, which is why they used to respect nature with a deep feeling of love and affection. As modern humans have transformed the anthropocosmic view into an anthropocentric view with modern scientific knowledge, they cannot show due respect to what is dead or mechanistic in their understanding; therefore, the natural world is brutally tortured by them.

In Nasr's view, without changing the perception of modern humans to nature, the present environmental problems cannot be solved. Nasr appreciates the traditional understanding of nature and spiritual feeling humans have for the natural world, then advocates these traditional knowledges to be followed for environmental sustainability. Nasr suggests rediscovering the sacred quality of nature, which is disconnected from modern humans. If modern humans see nature as alive, they can reconnect sacredness to it; when nature regains its sacredness through human understanding and actions, it may be possible to keep the natural environment at a sustainable level.

As Nasr considers nature living and recognises its intrinsic value, his views of nature are very close to bio-centric or eco-centric value approaches to environmental ethics. However, there are some significant differences between the bio-centric approach and Nasr's model. In a radical bio-centric approach, the God-gifted status of humans is lowered and brought to the same level as other non-human entities in the environment, but in Nasr's view, the special dignity of humans is not lost and he never considers humans at the level of other non-human animals. His views relate to a bio-centric approach in a sense that he never underestimates and ignores other living forms on the earth; rather, he recognises the inherent value of all living organisms without relation to humans.<sup>50</sup> His views also relate to the eco-centric approach in a sense that he has successfully shown the intimate relationship between humans and the creation of God and suggested not to damage this deep relationship. Like a bio-centric approach, the position of humans is also belittled in an eco-centric value approach; so, it cannot comply fully with what Nasr suggests.

Nasr's view of the environment does not comply with earthism and the Gaia hypothesis, because both these radical environmental movements replace God with the earth. Some other radical environmental movements like deep ecology and social ecology do not match Nasr's God-Human-Earth hierarchical relationship model. Deep ecologists argue the present environmental crisis relates to the special dignity of humans over all other living entities in the

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Nasr, *Man, and Nature*, 48.

environment; so, according to them, environmental justice is possible only when the special status of humans is reduced to the level of other biotic forms. On the other hand, social ecologists argue environmental sustainability requires a complete social change and reformation. Eco-feminists, for instance, argue for the complete elimination of the patriarchal social system to ensure environmental preservation. In Nasr's view, these environmental movements seem to be cause-centred approaches, ignoring the distinctive dignity of human beings as vicegerents of God on earth. They lack the metaphysical understanding of the universe and fail to articulate some potential qualities of humans for diverting the current human perceptions in favour of environmental sustainability.

Nasr appreciates the sustainable agriculturalist and green movement, though these are not sufficient to address the vast problems of the present environmental crisis. Nasr contends present environmental ethics is insufficient to deal with the environmental problems<sup>51</sup> as it cannot generate inner feelings in the human heart for the environment. For him, the present unprecedented environmental crisis is basically a spiritual crisis;<sup>52</sup> so, without addressing this root cause, the problem cannot be dealt with properly. Therefore, Nasr attempts to convince modern humans to divert their concentration to this grass-root cause, then reconnect nature with the human heart. So, Nasr does not adhere primarily to a specific value approach of environmental ethics, but his way of addressing the issue signifies the traditional understanding of nature with a more spiritual feeling, which he states is the best method to reverse the current situation.

### ***Evaluating Cobb's and Nasr's Eco-religious Approaches regarding Environmental Ethics***

Cobb and Nasr present their own understanding and suggestions for environmental sustainability through constructive criticisms of a rigid anthropocentric value approach to environmental ethics. Though their views seemingly relate to bio-centric and eco-centric value approaches to ecological ethics, the way they view human responsibility toward the natural world does not match completely with these approaches. They do not want to compromise the position of God with radical environmental movements – earthism or the Gaia hypothesis. Similarly, they do not reduce the special status of humans to other non-human entities as seen in the deep ecological and/or green movement.

To them, present environmental ethics is insufficient to address the unprecedented ecological crisis. For them, the current ecological crisis is also a spiritual crisis; so, a solution requires a sound spirituality, which is totally ignored in the secular scientific worldview of which both are critical. They revitalise heartfelt responsibility in the human mind toward the natural world and suggest humans take sincere care of the environment as responsible creatures of God on earth. Both focus repeatedly on the responsible attitudes of humans to the non-human entities of the environment as sharing partners on the same earth, then they urge humans to modify their present behaviours toward the natural world. Cobb's ecological model of life and

---

<sup>51</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 272-273.

<sup>52</sup> Nasr, "The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis."

Nasr's God–Human–Earth relationship model, though different from each other, seem unique and distinct from the existing value approaches to environmental ethics.

## CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that Cobb and Nasr deal with the present ecological crisis from their respective religious understandings of nature. Both eco-religious scholars come from different backgrounds in terms of their religious affiliation and education; Cobb, coming from a Protestant Christian theological background, and Nasr, coming from a Shia Islamic religious and science background, converge on a common issue of the present ecological crisis. Arguably true, their theoretical discussions differ from one another in terms of approach, but they equally share the same purpose in reducing the current ecological crisis. They are not only eco-religious scholars of their respective faith traditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the way they connect ecological equilibrium with religious traditions is distinct from others.

In his eco-theological approach to environmental ethics, Cobb seems more practical than Nasr, while Nasr seems more spiritual than Cobb. Nasr sees the solution of the environmental crisis in going back to a traditional way of life, but Cobb is somewhat critical of Nasr's view. Cobb wants to reform some Christian traditional views of nature, but Nasr advocates for following traditional religious or spiritual views to mitigate the ecological crisis. While Nasr talks about sacred science, Cobb deals with postmodern science. Cobb wants to solve the problem through his ecological model of life and development, while Nasr sees the solution in ensuring a balanced and just relationship with God–Human–Earth. In reference to the possibility of a solution through modified science and technology, Cobb seems optimistic, but Nasr is more pessimistic. Cobb seems more philosophical and practical in his approach, but Nasr seems more traditional and spiritual. Nasr seems assertive of traditional views of nature, but Cobb seems somewhat critical of traditional ways of understanding. So, Cobb's approach is reconstructive and Nasr's approach is retrieval. In Nasr's view, without changing the present secular scientific worldview, it is not possible to solve the ecological crisis properly. In contrast, Cobb sees the possibility in his proposed ecological model of life and development. In their view, the present form of the environmental ethics is insufficient to deal with the current ecological crisis. For Cobb, the traditional concept of stewardship fails to address the issue, but Nasr does not seem critical of it.

Cobb and Nasr realise equally the importance of dialogue between/among religions on ecological issues. They also suggest expanding such dialogue with secular people, scientists, political leaders and government officers to create collective action plans for reducing the ecological problems. Their understanding of the environment is opposite to the mechanistic view of nature. According to their arguments, nature is not dead as the scientific worldview sees it; rather, nature is alive. In this context, Cobb describes the environment with a metaphor of life through biological science and eco-system, while Nasr connects it with a deeper spiritual feeling through a metaphysical understanding and mystical experience. Cobb's ecological model of life and Nasr's God–Human–Earth relationship model cover some of the existing

value approaches of the environmental ethics, but their models are not confined in any particular approach. Their models may have a more connection with a bio-centric approach, but these are more distinct and unique from the biocentrism in terms of holistic thought, because Cobb and Nasr see nature from its totality not from its particularity or partial side.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Belshaw, Christopher. *Environmental Philosophy: Reason, Nature and Human Concern*. Chesham Bucks: Acumen, 2001.
- Benson, John. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction with Readings*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Birch, Charles, and John B. Cobb, Jr. *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community*. Texas: Environmental Ethics Book, 1982.
- Blanchard, Kathryn D., and Kevin J. O'Brien. *An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism: Ecology, Virtue, and Ethics*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014.
- Brennan, Andrew, and Y. S. Lo. *Understanding Environmental Philosophy*. Durham: Acumen, 2010.
- Brennan, Scott, and Wilhott, Jay, eds. *Environment: The Science Behind the Stories*. San Francisco: Pearson/Benjamin Cummings, 2005.
- Breuilly, Elizabeth, and Martin Palmer, eds. *Christianity and Ecology*. New York: Cassel, 1992.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1962.
- Cobb, John B., Jr. *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*. Texas: Environmental Ethics Book, 1972.
- Cobb, John B., Jr. *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992.
- Cobb, John B., Jr. *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1994.
- Cobb, John B., Jr. *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1999.
- Cobb, John B., Jr. *Theological Reminiscences*. Claremont, California: Process Century Press, 2014.
- Curry, Patrick. *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, M A: Polity Press, 2011.
- Daly, Herman E., John B. Cobb, and Clifford W. Cobb. *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- Dien, M. Izzî. *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*. Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2000.
- Dombayci, M. A. "Teaching of Environmental Ethics: Caring Thinking." *Journal of Environmental Protection and Ecology* 15, no. 3(A) (2014): 1404-1421.



- Dombrowski, Daniel A. *Hartshorne and the Metaphysics of Animal Rights*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.
- Ehrlich, Paul. *The Population Bomb*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968.
- Elsdon, Ron. *Bent World: Science, the Bible, and the Environment*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981.
- Foltz, Richard C., Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin. *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2003.
- Griffin, David Ray, and Joseph C. Hough. *Theology and the University: Essays in Honor of John B. Cobb*. Albany: State University of New York, 1991.
- Hessel, Dieter T, and Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of the Earth and Humans*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Centre for the Study of World Religions, 2000.
- Hope, Aimie L. B., and Christopher R. Jones. "The Impact of Religious Faith on Attitudes to Environmental Issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) Technologies: A Mixed Methods Study." *Technology in Society* 38 (2014): 48-59.
- Jenkins, Willis, and Christopher K. Chapple. "Religion and Environment." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 36 (2011): 441-463.
- Jenkins, Willis J. *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Karic, Enes. "Nasr: Tinker of the Sacred." In *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian W. Stone, Jr., 782-783. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001.
- Lai, Pan-Chiu. "God of Life and Ecological Theology: A Chinese Christian Perspective." *Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (2013): 67-82.
- Lai, Pan-Chiu. "Interreligious Dialogue and Environmental Ethics." *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 21, no. 1 (2011): 5-19.
- Martin-Schramm, James B., and Stivers, Robert L. *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003.
- McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Mevorach, Ian. "In Search of a Christian Muslim Common Path from Desacralization to Resacralization of Nature: Sallie McFague and Seyyed Hossein Nasr on the Ecological Crisis." Unpublished PhD diss., Boston University, 2015.
- Misra, R. P., ed. *Environmental Ethics: A Dialogue of Culture*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1995.

- Moltmann, J. *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, and Muzaffar Iqbal. "The Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis." *Islam & Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 75-96.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "An Intellectual Autobiography." In *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian W. Stone, Jr., 3-85. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine: Conceptions of Nature and Methods used for Its Study by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Man, and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. USA: George Allen & Unwin, 1976 [1968].
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Religion and the Order of Nature*. New York: Oxford Universe Press, 1996.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *The Need for a Sacred Science*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis." *The Ecologist* 30 (2000): 18-20.
- Rockefeller, Stephen C., and John C. Elder. *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue—An Interfaith Dialogue*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Taylor, Alastair M., and Duncan M. Taylor. "Our Common Future: World Development and the Environment." In *Planet Earth: Problems and Prospects*, edited by James A. Leith, Raymond A. Price and John H. Spencer, 25-42. Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995.
- Toynbee, Arnold. "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis." *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 3, no. 1-4 (1972): 141-146.
- Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John A. Grim. "Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 1-22.
- Vromans, Kees, ed. *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction and Learning Guide*. Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing Ltd., 2012.
- White, Lynn Townsend. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-1207.